

AIR FORCE

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COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

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Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief

Air Force

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

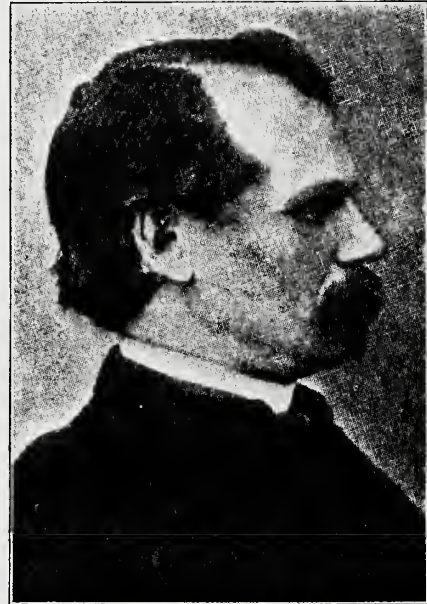
From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A E R O N A U T I C S

had held them as a personal trophy after the close of the war.

In 1859 Professor Lowe,* meteorologist and inventor, built the balloon *City of New York*, then the largest ever constructed (diameter, 130 ft.), for a flight across the Atlantic. The outbreak of the Civil War upset that plan. Professor Lowe went to Washington to propose to General Winfield Scott the formation of a balloon corps. The General was not impressed, finally lent his ear and his aid only at the personal prompting of President Lincoln.

Proudly Professor Lowe made his first official ascent on July 24, 1861, and had the satisfaction of watching the movements of the Confederates after the battle of Manassas, and of being shot at. By the



Culver Service

THE LATE PROFESSOR T. S. C. LOWE

Lincoln let him go up.

Silk Dresses in the Sky

In 1862 the women of the Confederacy were called upon to make a strange sacrifice in the cause of Secession. Their army wanted all the silk dresses in the South. Chests, closets, wardrobes were ransacked and bales of silk dresses were sent to a designated station. There a battery of sewing machines stitched them into a great envelope for a balloon. For the Union army had been harassing the lines of grey-coats with artillery fire directed by balloon observers.

The Confederate balloon was mounted on a barge in the James River. The barge ran aground and was promptly captured, balloon and all, by the Federals. "With it," wrote General Longstreet, "went the last silk dress of the Confederacy."

Last week the remnants of those dresses went to the Smithsonian Institution. They were the gift of the family of the late Professor Thaddeus S. Carlincourt Lowe, aeronautics chief of the Union Army, who

*Another favorite bludgeon is a fire-extinguisher, often applied to students who "freeze" the controls. According to a legend popular among airmen, Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd had to use similar tactics when he discovered that brain-fogged Pilot Bert Acosta was stubbornly steering a course "back to America" after they had reached the coast of France. Biographer Charles J. V. Murphy (*Struggle: The Life of Commander Byrd*) delicately pictures Acosta collapsing of his own accord, while Byrd stands reluctantly brandishing a flashlight as a bludgeon.

following May, the Professor had perfected telegraph communication with ground forces and the last doubting foot-soldier was convinced. Professor Lowe detected a Confederate maneuver to attack the troops of General Heintzleman, who was separated from the main force at Fair Oaks. Warning was flashed just in time to save the entire Army of the Potomac. In many a later engagement Professor Lowe observed artillery fire, communicating the effect of each shot.

After the war Professor Lowe made a few captive balloon ascensions at New York and Philadelphia, but they were financial failures. Then he gave up the business, sold his apparatus to the Brazilian government. In 1867 he received patents for a process of making artificial ice. Later he achieved fame for methods of making and applying water gas in heating and lighting.

Through his efforts were built the observatory and steep inclined railway at Mount Lowe, near Pasadena, Calif., favorite picture-post-card subject of sightseers.

*A granddaughter is Mrs. Florence Lowe Barnes of San Marino, Calif., prominent flyer.

RELICS RECALL OLD AIR CORPS OF UNION ARMY

By OSCAR LEIDING

Associated Press Aviation Editor

WASHINGTON—Relics of America's first air corps, which saw action in the Civil War are to rest within sight of the spot where Abraham Lincoln became "air-wise."

Seventy years ago Lincoln stood on the Smithsonian grounds and received from Prof. Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, a 29-year-old balloonist, the first telegraph message exchanged between aircraft and earth.

The tall president was so impressed with the military value of the silken bag that he intervened for Lowe during the Civil war when the aeronaut, offering to form a balloon corp, had been rebuffed by Gen. Winfield Scott.

Lincoln armed Lowe with a note but the aeronaut failed four times to see Scott. The president thereupon accompanied Lowe in a call on the general, and arrangements were made immediately for the use of balloons.

Today Lincoln's note rests in Smithsonian institution, the gift of Lowe's relatives. With it are the field glasses used by the balloonist as first commander of America's aeronautic corps, an altimeter used on all his ascensions, and a valve from his balloon, the "Great Western," which he had previously built to be wafted across the Atlantic.

Also there are a valve from the

"Enterprise," named the "Intrepid" when it "joined" the army, in which he sailed from Cincinnati to South Carolina to show the existence of a prevailing west-to-east wind; faded photographs and sketches, and a roll of fabric pieced from silk dresses for the Confederacy's only balloon.

In all, Lowe had five balloons under his command—"Intrepid," "Constitution," "Washington," "Union," and "Eagle"—which were run up behind the federal lines to observe

enemy movements and direct artillery fire.

While the war brought out Prof. Lowe's theories of the military values of captive lighter-than-air craft, it stopped his projected flight across the Atlantic, for which he had built the "Great Western," an airship of 725,000 cubic feet capacity.

WYOMINGTON PA HERALD
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 1931.

Lincoln Air-Minded in War, Records of Scientist Show

AIR-MINDEDNESS is something one could hardly associate with Abraham Lincoln, but records revealed in an unpublished autobiography show that, as president, he realized the military value of aviation and ordered the organization of the first aeronautical corps of the Union army after a set-back at Bull Run.

In the papers of Professor T. S. C. Lowe, American inventor, meteorologist, and aeronaut, were discovered the remarkable foresight of the Civil War president. The papers are now in possession of Mrs. Augustine Brownback, Professor Lowe's daughter.

It was Lowe's plan to use balloons to plot the location of confederate troops. Although aircraft are commonly used for such a purpose today, Lowe's idea was met with scorn by army veterans. Nevertheless, official Washington showed interest, and Lowe went to the capital to demonstrate his plan for the government.

He went aloft in his balloon when Lincoln was present to observe the demonstration. Sending telegraph messages by trailing wires to men on the ground, Lowe demonstrated how quickly information about enemy positions could be obtained and disseminated.

General Opposes Plan

Lincoln and his secretary of war were impressed by the exhibition, and they arranged for Lowe to see Gen. Winfield Scott, in charge of the Union army. Scott was openly antagonistic to the idea, and it took a personal visit by Lincoln to change his mind.

Under Lincoln's orders Lowe managed to organize an aeronautical corps and get his work started, and before the

end of the war it was generally agreed that the observational data that he collected was of strategic importance.

With the help of Capt. John Dahlgren, later to become an admiral, Lowe constructed the first aircraft carrier in history—a flat-decked barge, towed behind



Union gunboats, which served as a landing area for balloons assigned to naval patrol.

After the war Lowe continued his scientific activities. He died in 1913.

One of the interesting stories in Lowe's autobiography is the account of his flight into the South at the outset of the war. He left Cincinnati in his balloon and traveled 900 miles until he was forced down in South Carolina.

Mistaken for a Union spy, when he was really making the expedition for scientific reasons of his own interest, Lowe barely escaped hanging. It happened that a person familiar with contemporary scientists recognized Lowe and persuaded the emotional mob that it would be a blot on the honor of the South to lynch such an eminent scientist.

So, Lowe lived to inaugurate the use of balloons in the army aeronautical corps and become the trail-blazer for the "flying cadets" of today. President Lincoln's note authorizing Lowe's aviation plans is preserved in the Smithsonian Institution, but until his papers were revealed the full details of its background were unknown.

W. L. ... (R) ... 2-9-41

Q. Is it true Abraham Lincoln started the Air Force?—M. A. Samuels, Louisville.

A. In one sense. After seeing a balloon ascension from the White House lawn, President Lincoln appointed the aeronaut, Thaddeus Lowe, chief of the Army Corps of Aeronautics. Both the Union and Confederacy thereafter used balloons as observation posts.

Balloon Reconnaissance Marks 150th Anniversary

June 12, 2011

American Forces Press Service|by Donna Miles

WASHINGTON -- The intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support critical to operations in Afghanistan got its start 150 years ago in June, when a balloonist showed then-President Abraham Lincoln how a gas-filled balloon could help the Union Army prevail in the Civil War.

Thaddeus Lowe met with President Lincoln June 11, 1861, to pitch the concept of balloon reconnaissance.

The idea wasn't totally new, explained Tom Crouch, the curator for lighter-than-air aircraft at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum here. The French first used balloons in 1794 to observe Dutch and French movements during the Battle of Fleurus.

Mr. Lowe got his chance to show President Lincoln the balloon's ISR capabilities as he reported his sightings from a tethered balloon as it floated 500 feet over Washington. Mr. Lowe took a telegrapher and a lightweight telegraph set with him in the balloon's basket, and he delivered reports to the White House via the War Department, Mr. Crouch said.

"He could see 25 miles in every direction, and was able to report on what he was seeing in the military camps below," Mr. Crouch said. "He demonstrated the fact that if you could get above the battlefield, you could see a lot of useful things, (such as) where the enemy was and what the enemy was doing. Obviously, that was incredibly useful information."

Convinced that balloons could provide a critical advantage on the battlefield, President Lincoln gave the War Department the go-ahead to establish the Union Balloon Corps. It stood up four months later, providing the U.S.' first "air force" and delivering the nation's first aerial reconnaissance capability, Mr. Crouch said.

"Some of the most important generals of the war loved the balloons and appreciated their value in what they could deliver," he said. "They found it genuinely useful in supporting what they were doing."

But the Balloon Corps was disbanded in 1863, as the victim of bureaucracy as well as logistics. It was run by a civilian organization that wasn't able to work smoothly with the Army. Further complicating things was the fact that the balloons required extensive logistical support to move and inflate, and an entire company of Soldiers to operate.

Another challenge was to get the intelligence collected from the balloons to the ground troops who needed it as quickly as possible.

After the demise of the Balloon Corps, balloon reconnaissance began to flourish in Europe, Mr. Crouch said.

And 150 years later, in an age of supersonic aircraft and satellites, Mr. Crouch said balloons continue to provide critical intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance in ongoing military operations. Now

unmanned, they're equipped with cameras, electronic sensors and communication equipment to gather intelligence and provide communications links.

Ashton B. Carter, the undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics, has worked to provide more of this capability to ground forces in Afghanistan.

This spring, he announced plans to increase the number of aerostats to support counterinsurgency operations and provide increased force protection.

"We are going to be, this summer, increasing many-fold the number of aerostat-borne cameras," he said. "They're terrific.

"Balloons are still with us, still providing reconnaissance for warfighters," Mr. Crouch said. "One hundred and fifty years later, balloons are still performing the function they did in 1861."

The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum will mark the 150th anniversary of Mr. Lowe's demonstration and the birth of the Union Balloon Corps June 11 on the National Mall. Reenactors will portray Mr. Lowe, President Lincoln and Union soldiers as they demonstrate a 19,000-cubic-foot netted gas balloon, built in 1941 to closely replicate Mr. Lowe's, officials said.

The Air and Space Museum also will give presentations about ballooning and espionage during the Civil War and give visitors hands-on educational activities inside the museum.

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